

Performing Rites revisited

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ABSTRACT

Performing Rites. On the Value of Popular Music was published 25 years ago. The aim of the book was to address issues of musical value and to show that arguments about music as good or bad were as vital for popular music culture as for high art. In this paper I consider the changes in popular music practices and studies in the last quarter of a century and reflect on the effects of these changes on value discourse. The changes that interest me are the digital transformation of musical communication, leading to new ways of making, listening to and sharing music; the demographic forces that have reshaped both the geography and the ecology of the music market; and the emergence of electronic dance music in a new economy of 'live' music. What does it mean for a sociological approach to aesthetics that people no longer have to listen to music they don't like? That a once taken-for-granted apparatus of music authority (music radio and the music press) has been undermined by algorithms? That dancing is such important a way of listening? What is a 'musician' in the digital age? In addressing these questions, I acknowledge too that just as popular music makers and listeners are constructed as such by historical and discursive possibilities, so are popular music scholars. We are free to study what and how we like but only in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. How have these circumstances changed since 1996?.

Keywords: value, popular music, listening, dancing, streaming, choice.

SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

This paper was originally written as the introductory keynote for the 17th IASPM Conference, which was held in Gijón June 2013. I was pleased to be asked to give this lecture because I owed my career to IASPM, a wonderfully supportive and challenging organisation for those of us who were originally interested in establishing popular music as an academic field of study, and I was particularly grateful for the invite because I was by then coming to the end of my career: I retired from fulltime teaching that August and this was my last IASPM event. But I was also surprised. I rarely go to see old bands play their old hits and I don't think the future of popular music studies will be found in celebrations of what we once thought it might be. The value of popular music lies in the way it reflects on the present and suggests a future

not in its ability to make us feel good about the past. And what goes for old rockers rehearsing old songs goes for old academics rehearsing old arguments. I found it particularly surprising that I, a founder member of IASPM, should be asked to introduce a conference organised around the theme of “challenging orthodoxies”.

After some thought I decided that the best way I could approach my task was via my 1996 book *Performing Rites*. The aims of *Performing Rites* were to show, first, that a sociologist could address issues of musical value thought to be the preserve of philosophers and concerning primarily classical music and, second, that such issues were essential to the ways in which popular music worked. My starting point was that arguments about music as good or bad, right or wrong,

constantly engage popular musicians and listeners; they are central to all cultural life and not just for the high art world bourgeoisie. I also wanted to challenge a then dominant strand of cultural studies that saw no place for value judgements in the classroom.

My approach was rooted in Marxist sociology. Put simply, I believed that people—musicians, fans—were free to make their own musical judgements and choices for their own individual reasons, but that such judgements and choices were always made in historical circumstances not of their own choosing: material circumstances (the effects of technology, commerce, education, and institutional power of various sorts) and discursive circumstances (how musical choices and values are expressed and understood). I argued that aesthetic judgements are, necessarily, social constructs. They are determined even in the most individual circumstances by what is possible, what is imaginable and what is explicable.

The first point to make in this essay, then, is that material and discursive circumstances have changed since 1996 and the social construction of value judgements in popular music must therefore be re-examined. The drivers of cultural change remain technology, demography and ideology and the last twenty-five years of popular music history have been shaped by the rise to dominance of digital means of making, storing and listening to music, by the continuing effects of ageing and generational change, and by the latest manifestations of globalisation, the movement of people, goods and ideas across cultural and geographical borders. Such historical forces have driven—but also been themselves driven by—the emergence of new social and political mores.

The effects of these developments have, of course, been addressed by popular music scholars and it is not my concern here to summarise or critique their work. My interest is narrower: what are implications of recent popular music history for my arguments about value and discourse in *Performing Rites*? And an added complication here is that it is not only popular music culture that has changed since 1996;

so has the academy. If music makers and listeners are constructed as such by historical circumstance and discursive possibilities, so are music scholars. We may be free to study what and how we like but only in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, material and institutional, intellectual and conceptual. Popular Music Studies, that is to say, is a socially constructed academic enterprise, in terms of both what is studied and how research questions are conceived. If popular music can be defined, loosely, as the music people like, the question is which people? And there can be no doubt that in the academic development of popular music studies some people have been regarded as more significant than others (punks, for example, more significant than people who make or enjoy musicals) or that our sense of which people matter has changed over time, in response to the political challenges of feminist sociology and black cultural studies, for example.

Some of the constraints on our work as popular music scholars have always been acknowledged: academic conditions of employment and teaching, the effects of disciplinary territorialism and status hierarchies, the politics of research funding. IASPM was founded in response to such institutional indifference or hostility. But academic interests are also shaped by scholars' experiences outside the academy, by family life, by ageing and increased economic security. Time passing has its own effects on the accumulation of knowledge; digital technology has changed how music is studied as much as it has changed how music is made. One problem today, for example, is knowledge overload. When I was writing *Performing Rites* I was reasonably confident that I had read all the relevant academic writing on popular music in English and knew about the most significant work in other languages. By the time the book came out I had to accept that I could now hope to read only a small selection of the available scholarly work. Popular Music Studies was being developed by ever more scholars in ever more countries in ever more disciplines. Add to this the dialectic of academic generations, each new group of scholars arguing against their elders, and the effects of academic fashion.

Over the years key names (Adorno, Attali, Becker, Bourdieu ...) have recurred in and then vanished from IASPM conference debates, while once dominant concepts ('subcultures', say) have been replaced by new intellectual concerns ('identity', for example).

I can illustrate the interplay of changes in personal and professional circumstances with my own experience. When I wrote *Performing Rites* (which was based on a seminar programme for postgraduates), I taught in a media studies centre, I was a working rock critic, formed by UK/US discourse, and I was an active member of the European IASPM discussion network. Ten years later I was teaching in a traditional music department and had music colleagues and students, which meant engaging not just with musicology but also with the psychology and physiology of music, topics oddly absent from popular music studies. I had to all intents and purposes stopped being a rock critic (though I still chaired the judges of the Mercury Music Prize) and my research now focused on live rather than recorded music. For family reasons I'd mostly stopped travelling internationally; I spent much more time with musicians than journalists, and my postgraduate students had very different concerns than the students I'd taught in the first decades of my career.

If the questions that interest me now are not the same as they were when I wrote *Performing Rites* this is an effect of how I've changed as well as how popular music culture has developed. From my current perspective, it seems clear that popular music scholarship (and IASPM in particular) was initially a response to the emergence of a particular form of music-making, rock, which was defined by three sociological factors: the dominance of the music business by record publishing companies, the dominance of music making and listening by young people and the dominance of critical discourse by romantic ideas about authenticity. My first academic book, *The Sociology of Rock*, published in 1978, was certainly shaped by these factors and, in particular, by a need to theorise rock's sociological differences from low/pop music, on the one hand, and high/classical music

on the other. These concerns informed *Performing Rites* too.

Which is one reason why the book now seems dated. Rock is still a significant form of popular music but it is no longer the fulcrum of either a commercial or a cultural ecology. Musical access, for example, is now monopolised by streaming companies such as Spotify, Apple Music and YouTube rather than by record shops or broadcast music radio. By the beginning of the 2020s the corporate music industry might have recovered from the turn-of-the-century decline in record sales—it was certainly more profitable than ever—but this was because it had successfully adapted to the new commerce of digital streaming. Record companies have also had to adapt to the rise of global live music corporations such as Live Nation and to the remarkable growth of the festival economy. What was once young people's music is now played by heritage acts and tribute bands while the most popular live music of the new millennium, electronic dance music, has a very different aesthetic than either the indie club or the stadium rock concert.¹

How have such changes affected value discourses in popular music? In the rest of this essay I will address this question under three headings: musical choices, ways of listening and musicianship.

MUSICAL CHOICES

The English poet Lavinia Greenlaw remembers teenage life in 1970s Essex in these words:

Waiting to hear a song was like waiting for a bus to arrive in that village. I would stand on the side of the road an hour after the bus was due, unable to accept that it wasn't about to turn up, sure that as soon as I got home and closed the door it would. While waiting to hear what I liked on the radio, I had to listen to hours of other

¹ For an overview of the changes in the political economy of music in the UK between 1950 and 2015 see Frith et al 2013, 2019 and 2021.

music, but then something else might catch my attention. I'd be excited by one song only to be distracted by another. Songs found me and made sure I kept coming across them until one day they were in my head and I wanted to hear them. I missed something I had not possessed. What more delicate form of seduction could there be (Greenlaw 2021: 57)?

One of the most significant effects of the digital revolution is that teenagers no longer have to listen to music they don't like. Until 2016 I did. Every year, as chair of the judges of the Mercury Music Prize, I got sent around 250 CDs that I had to listen to over about six weeks. But this was an increasingly uncommon experience and one of the marked changes in how the Mercury Prize works in marketing terms is that whereas in 1993 people would take a chance on a shortlisted album and its sales would rise significantly, now people sample a track or two on Spotify and the effect on sales is much smaller. This is worth noting because historically, as Lavinia Greenlaw remembers, an important part of popular music culture was listening to things we didn't like, given the organisation of radio and TV programming, the limited number of domestic music outlets and the conservatism of school music lessons. The gamble of buying an album (once they ceased to be hit compilations) was that one spent one's money without having heard most of it. The major effect of digital technology on music consumption, in short, has been to change the nature of consumer choice.

When I was growing up the problem was not just choosing music one liked from what was there but also trying to find out what was not there. Hunting for records and collecting dance floor rarities were a necessary for popular music fandom, as was expressing a view on what was there, like it or not. Now, by contrast, I don't have to have a view of, say, Ed Sheeran or even Beyoncé because I don't have to listen to them. If we once heard music we liked in an unfriendly context (light entertainment programmes on the radio, for example), now the music we like is the context for everything else we hear. This is

one reason, I think, that many people over the age of 40 think that music is less important to young people these days, though the point here is, rather, that it is important in a different way. Introducing his campaign to ensure that everyone involved in making a record is properly rewarded in the digital music economy, Abba's Björn Ulvaeus explained to the BBC's Mark Savage that (September 22, 2021) that

We want to get back to that experience we had when we opened a double-sleeved LP and listened to the songs while reading the liner notes, I think that's a very valuable experience that young listeners today are missing.²

He doesn't explain, however, why this is such a valuable experience.

It could certainly be said that if people no longer need to justify their listening choices (because they no longer need to argue about them) then there is no pressing reason to be an 'informed' listener. Hence the declining demand for critics, for a critical authority, as indicated by the attrition of the music press. The question is now is not how do people talk about music but whether they talk about it at all. Historically the listener was hailed publicly, as it were, by journalists, broadcasters and the noise of record sales departments; this was how music marketing worked. Can such audience building work be done by algorithms? How are taste publics now constructed?

On the same day that the BBC was reporting Björn Ulvaeus's nostalgia for sleeve notes, the Guardian drew attention to a research paper published in Proceedings of the Royal Society which suggested that a mathematical model describing the spread of a disease through the population performed just as well when describing song download trends.

Dora Rosati, lead author of the study and former graduate in maths and statistics at McMaster Uni-

2 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-58643787>

versity in Ontario, Canada along with colleagues, wondered whether they could learn anything about how songs become popular using mathematical tools that are more usually applied to study the spread of infectious diseases.

The team turned to a database of almost 1.4bn individual song downloads from the now-discontinued music streaming service MixRadio. Focusing on the top 1,000 songs downloaded in the UK between 2007 and 2014, they measured how well a standard model of epidemic disease, called the SIR model, fitted trends in song downloads over time.

Rosati said: «It implies that a lot of the social processes that drive the spread of disease, or analogues of those processes, might also be driving the spread of songs.» More specifically, it supports the idea that both music and infectious diseases depend on social connections to spread through populations.

«With a disease, if you come into contact with someone who is ill, then you have a certain chance of catching that disease. With songs, it looks very similar. The big difference is that for songs, it doesn't necessarily have to be physical contact – it could be that my friend used this cool new song in their Instagram story, so now I'm going to go and find it.»³

Popular music scholars have traditionally seen themselves as fans, as collectors, accumulating the listening knowledge that gives them the authority to act as implicit promoters or curators. Is this claim still feasible in the digital listening world? Maybe our role now is to be unlike everyday listeners, whether as historians, archivists and custodians of a past in which no-one else has much interest or through our obligation to unpopular music, to music that no-one listens to. The first task means becoming expert in musical memory, making critical studies of the heritage and nostalgia industries, and concerning ourselves with

the preservation and archiving of popular music's material objects and their traces. The second task is to make the unheard heard at a time when people can choose to listen to whatsoever they like.

A question remains, though: what kind of authority can popular music academics claim in the digital age? Why should anyone out there take any interest at all in what we say? Early rock academics like me tended to think of themselves as critics, although, on the whole, scholars don't make particularly good critics. They are rarely concerned about what listeners actually hear.

Many years ago I went to a meeting of the then IASPM executive in Philip Tagg's flat in Gothenburg, The meeting coincided with the Eurovision Song Contest, which was being held that year in Sweden. A bright spark from Swedish radio thought it would be good if we—as IASPM—gave our expert view of who should win after all the performances. When the first act appeared on Philip's TV, one executive member, not from Europe, was so appalled that a debate began about popular music, commercial exploitation, the corruption of audiences, etc, a discussion so heated that when the call came in from Swedish radio we were unable to make any comment at all because we hadn't actually watched any of the acts.

This is an example of popular music academics-as-critics being less concerned with what is there—the sounds—than with what isn't—their meanings. Music either stands for something else, represents something, or needs interpreting, means something which lies behind or beneath or deep within the actual sounds that meet our ears. The consequence of this is a kind of research negligence. We still lack informed understandings of what a listener does and what listening is. There are useful accounts of the ideology of listening—the construction of the silent, attentive, autonomous listener in the nineteenth century concert hall, for example, but there's little evidence that people—even in concert halls—do listen like this (even if they know how to behave as if they were). And it's even more doubtful that this

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/sep/22/mathematicians-discover-music-really-can-be-infectious-like-a-virus>

public mode of listening is how classical music is listened to in the home.

The most suggestive account of listening to popular music I know was written by Franco Fabri, describing in a published conversation his experience of listening to an album by the British group, the Shadows. He describes a state of mind that lies somewhere between being awake and asleep, a sort of conscious suspension of controlled thought so that the flow of the music determines the flow of scraps of imagery, emotion, memory, feeling.⁴

Sociologists, by contrast, whether Bourdieu writing about classical audiences in the 1950s or more recent scholars writing about music festivals in the 2010s, tend to treat music listening as an occasion for something else: a display of ‘distinction’ or the expression of ‘identity’. But this is not to answer the question that interests me: what are listeners are actually doing as listeners?

WAYS OF LISTENING

In the autumn of 2021 The Guardian ran an interview with Sir Lucien Grainge, British-born head of the New York-based global corporation Universal Music. Grainge explained to the paper why the company’s owners, the French conglomerate Vivendi, had decided to float Universal as independently stock market listed. Universal’s performance was booming thanks to the surge in digital listening. Ten years previously, when record sales had plunged but streaming was yet to produce significant income, Universal had made €4.2bn in revenues and turned a profit of €507m. The company was now on track to make almost €8bn in annual revenue and annual profits of potentially €1.5bn. And, Grainge suggested,

There’s so much more to come, so many opportunities. The penetration rates of digital services in some

of the largest countries haven’t yet reached those of more mature markets, so there’s plenty of headroom in those key markets. And then when you add fans’ growing listening through voice-controlled speakers, connected cars, social media, gaming, fitness and so on, you realise why we believe we’re just at the beginning of a new wave of music consumption. This wave is taking place on a variety of platforms – some of which were not even on the radar just a few years ago.

Mark Mulligan, an analyst at Midia Research, confirmed that about 10% of the almost \$22bn in global streaming revenues in 2020 came via licensing revenues from listening on platforms such as Facebook, through smart speakers such as Amazon’s Alexa, in games such as Fortnite and from the home cycling business. In his words,

Music is going everywhere. Besides TV shows, games, advertising, TikTok, Peloton, there’s lots of growth on Instagram. Streaming was like the jump-start in the heart of the industry. It got it going and is keeping the lights on. But it’s not all of the story anymore. Investors are buying music catalogues, emerging markets are showing strong growth. It’s all making the music industry look interesting for investors. The industry looks like it is in peak growth.⁵

It also doesn’t look much like it did in the rock era and is organised around quite different ways of listening. This is also apparent in another effect of digital music making, the commercial success of electronic dance music. Dancing has, in fact, always been one of the most important ways of listening to popular music but has not much interested rock-inflected researchers. Anthropologists may have long argued that music and dance cannot be treated as separate activities but popular music scholars have largely either ignored dance altogether or associated it with less significant pop music genres. In practice, however, the history of popular music can’t be disentangled from the

4 See Fabbri and Quiñones 2014.

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/sep/21/universal-chief-growth-digital-listening-boom-record-music-flotation-lucien-grainge>

history of dance, of who dances with whom, where, when and how.

The post-war evolution of popular music in Britain, for example, was driven by the needs of dancers: dancing to jazz in clubs laid the foundations for what became rock & roll and r'n'b clubs, blues clubs, discos, and dance clubs. What was new in the 1950s was not that young people spent lots of time dancing (they did that in the 1930s and 1940s, too) but that they now spent increasing time dancing in venues to which only young people went. The significance of dance for youth can clearly be related to courtship and sexuality but dance was also a setting in which listening happened, in which the meaning/value of music was related to physical responses and articulations. In the period 1950-1967 two kinds of ideological struggle over listening took place in the UK: listening silently vs listening noisily (an ongoing issue) and listening as spectacle (watching the band) vs listening as engagement (dancing). Promoters had problems when one group of people wanted to watch the performers and another wanted to dance to them. It was difficult to organise the space so both groups could be satisfied.

Since I wrote *Performing Rites* the cultural importance of the dance floor has become more obvious but we still lack sociological studies of dancing as listening.⁶ How do dancers understand the relative pleasures of narrative drive and repetition or the way their attention switches between layers of sound? How does the ability to hear different sonic patterns relate to the experience of moving to them? Lavinia Greenlaw suggests that

Perhaps dancing is the ultimate form of amplification. You listen to a song and your body makes it louder. You become louder too, both more yourself and freed. I've always found dancing hard to resist and am ashamed of how

much I want to do it. Sometimes I dance because I am feeling too shy to make conversation. Or I become overexcited—feeling!—and instantly try to contain this, Is a good song all it takes for me to abandon my measured self? Who is this alarming creature who feels compelled to throw herself around? I hold her back and try to dance as casually as those who are jiggling on the spot as they chat (Greenlaw 2021: 58-9).

One of the new terms in the Oxford English Dictionary's 2013 appendix was «dad dancing», which it defined as «the kind of dancing done by fathers at weddings that embarrasses their children» and the revised 2014 Chambers Dictionary defined as «dancing with an embarrassing disregard of rhythm and fashion, considered characteristic of middle-aged men». Such definitions, like Greenlaw's self-reflection, open up all sorts of questions about the work of dance in the social relations that construct musical listening. From a rock perspective, an oddity of dancing is that it is not focused on stardom: on the dance floor music is experienced through the bodies of the dancers not the performers while the work of the DJ challenges the supposed distinction between creativity in the studio and creativity on the stage. The commercial response to the confusions here was to market 'super DJs', embodying a new kind of star performer, but this only raised further questions: are dancers listening (or listeners dancing) to the super DJ, to the music he or she is playing, or to both at once? Who is the music maker here?

MUSICIANSHIP

In September 2021 the UK's Intellectual Property Office published a comprehensive review of "music creators' earnings in the digital era". One of its more robust findings was that "there is no evidence that there was ever a time when recorded music was the basis of substantial income for large numbers of musicians, even when total revenues were higher ..." (Hesmondhalgh et al 2021: 18). Most musicians make a living not from royalties, record sales or license fees but from selling their services. For them music

6 The pioneering journal, *Dancecult*, addresses such issues, and encourages ethnographic study, but its articles often seem to suggest that what's at stake are meanings rather than practices. It's as if philosophers are more drawn to the dance floor than sociologists.

is a craft not a commodity. This was true when the record publishing industry dominated the music business in the 1950s-1990s and it is true now, when it doesn't. What are the implications?

First, this is to challenge to the dominant academic treatment of musicians in terms of their creative self-expression (the romantic notion that underpinned rock discourse) and to suggest that we should understand musicians as workers not artists, as people who make music not for themselves but for other people, for social occasions, needs and purposes. The issue here is not art vs commerce but what counts as excellence in craft skills and techniques and who is best judge of this.

Second, music making is a collective process. 'Creativity' involves collaborative hierarchies among a variety of musical workers: not just the performers, instrumentalists and singers but also the people who make the performance possible. And such hierarchies change according to circumstance. The sociology of music can, in this respect, be related to the sociology of science. Think, for example, of the effects on music making of changes in the technological conditions of musical production. The history of popular musicians is necessarily also the history of musical instruments, of recording studios and on-stage amplification.

Third, to think of music as craft not commodity is to challenge accepted academic definitions of 'popular music'. It could certainly be argued, for example, that jazz has been rather more significant for the story of popular music than rock, though one wouldn't know this from IASPM events, and while we've tended (because of the origins of IASPM) to define popular music against high music, from a craft perspective the terms of this contrast don't really work. Classical musicians are craftspeople too; they also provide musical services. Classical concerts, like rock concerts, are social events serving social purposes. Indeed, many working musicians deploy their technical skills in a great variety of music settings and certainly across the high/low divide.

Rereading *Performing Rites* I realise that many of the issues with which I was concerned had more to do with star making than music making and it is notable that some of the more imaginative work in popular music research developed under the labels of 'celebrity studies', on the one hand, and 'fan studies', on the other. Is there a similarly vibrant subfield of research into what one might call the everyday life of musicians or into the social and technical relations upon which musicians' lives depend? If I were to rewrite *Performing Rites* now I'd be less interested in how musicians become stars than in how musicians make sense of their lives when they don't become stars. I'd be less interested in why people idolise performers than in how they regard performances which are mundane. Stardom and fandom are familiar effects of music commerce and although the terms of that commerce may have been changed by new technology, the logic of marketing remains the same. What it doesn't account for is the value of music as an ordinary part of ordinary lives.

CONCLUSION

When I studied research methods as part of my formal training in sociology in the late 1960s, my teacher, Shirley A. Starr, remarked that many people regarded sociologists as cold fish who took the oddities and accidents of people's individual quirks and choices and explained them away as social facts, fitting them into patterns determined by institutional factors, by social norms, functions, roles, and so on. (Durkheim's *Suicide* was the key text here.) She suggested that we could also think about our task the other way round. We could show that the things that people did without thinking, 'naturally' as it were, may have been social facts but were also, from an academic perspective, quite strange. (Erving Goffman's writings were the text here.)

This suggestion has stayed with me, so I want to end this paper by suggesting that as sociologists we should begin from the premise that music is a strange thing for humans to do. This is one reason why evolutio-

nary biologists, psychoanalytic theorists and, indeed, Marxists have had difficulties with it. Why, for example, in 1950s Britain, did vast numbers of young (or youngish) people, mostly boys but girls too, suddenly decide that with no evident musical skill or training at all, they could pick up or fashion instruments, go on stage and play skiffle? Or why, in the decades since, all over Britain, have vast numbers of people, mostly (but not only) oldish people, often but not always professionals, been willing to spend a couple of hours a week (paying for the privilege) to sing in a choir, practising intensely, putting themselves under the authority of a choir ‘master’, working eventually with professional musicians, to perform one or two concerts a year? And what could be stranger than these two recent accounts of fan behaviour. The first is by Vice journalist Hannah Ewens; the second is by Cardiff media academic Lucy Bennett.

Through winter 2016 and early spring 2017 I’ve been waking up at 2 or 3am and taking the nightbus across London from my Peckham flat to a music venue. I don’t know who I’m going to find but since there’s a pop or rock gig on the following night, the fans will be there, wanting to be the first in. It doesn’t feel particularly exclusive to any type of music, as long as the fan base includes a lot of them. When I say “them” I mean almost exclusively teen girls, since that is who I find every time (Ewens 2019: 31).

Even though they are not physically present and are in different time zones, [U2] fans are gathering to share their opinions and knowledge and the excitement surrounding this specific event [a U2 stadium concert in South Africa] in such a way that they not only feel part of the “live” music experience, but also create their own. Some construct and post possible set-lists, sharing their own predictions, while others play the songs being performed as the songs are texted in. After the concert, the interest continues, with fans posting footage and songs from the show on YouTube and sharing their photos ... While some fans use social media to send bulletins to other fans throughout the concert, others take the connection further by

using a facility called 1000Mikes—self-described as Radio 2.0—to broadcast the entire show to them as it happens. The volunteer show attenders use their mobile phone to connect to the platform, which then generates a personal live broadcast channel, which other fans can access and listen in to through the website (Bennett 2012: 548).

These audience activities, like the performance activities of skiffle groups and choirs, are undoubtedly odd things to do and their value for their participants are not easily explicable in terms of the commerce, art and folk discourses I analysed in *Performing Rites*. It is particularly important for sociologists to document and celebrate the singular behaviour the love of music can inspire in everyday life presently, when music is ever more relentlessly mediated, explained and labelled. In the commercial logic of digital media, everything has to be categorised, everything must fit.

When I presented the original version of this paper in Gijón I ended by paying tribute to Jan Fairley, a IASPM colleague and Edinburgh friend who had been IASPM chair at the time of the previous conference (in South Africa in 2011) and died in 2012. Jan was someone who didn’t fit neatly into any scholarly slot. She was a freelance teacher and academic and a freelance broadcaster and journalist; her doctorate was in ethno-musicology but she felt at home in IASPM. At popular music conferences her mission was to ensure that arguments were not confined to Anglo-American popular music. As an ethnomusicologist she argued that concepts like authenticity or tradition had to pay heed to musicians’ practical decisions. Music making is a craft in all societies and in her many magazine interviews with world music stars Jan was always more interested in what they did than in who they were. She sought both to de-exoticise strange music and celebrate its strangeness as mundane.⁷

In Edinburgh Jan Fairley sang in two groups, a church choir and a female barbershop chorus, and she was

7 For a sample of Jan’s work see Fairley 2014.

always intrigued by the byways of musical sociability. She knew that music was the quintessential human activity, that making music is what makes us human. In evolutionary terms music is the basis of sociability, culture, the ability to do things together for pleasure, and it is therefore necessarily political, an important way of understanding what is meant by a good life.

The good life was not an issue I addressed directly in *Performing Rites* but it has been constantly on my mind during the disorienting Covid-19 experience of life without live music, and the questions I am now asking are these: How is music-making entwined

with daily life? How does music shape sociability? And my starting point is now that popular music is a process not a thing.⁸ Its value lies not in its congealed commodity form but as a social activity. Music is not something people have, it is something people do, as music-makers, as music listeners, as music lovers, on special occasions and as a matter of routine. Popular music, music, that is to say, rooted in social situations, is necessarily both taken-for-granted and wonderfully odd.

8 For an extended version of this argument see Frith 2018.



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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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